

GALLANTRY IN ACTION

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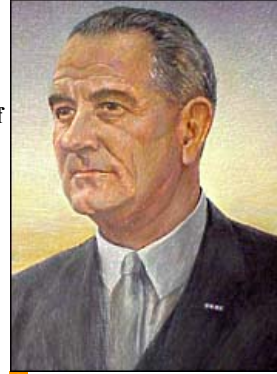
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The story behind LBJ's Silver Star

Merits of late president's wartime record still debated

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Navy Lt. Cmdr. Lyndon Baines Johnson, the first member of Congress to enter active duty in World War II, was awarded the Silver Star in 1942 for gallantry in action on a flight over enemy territory. But historians have called Johnson's decoration one of the most undeserved Silver Stars in history, and CNN's review of the historical record raises new questions about the circumstances of its award by Gen. Douglas MacArthur nearly 60 years ago.



[SETHELMAN NETWORK/NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY]

[Click here](#) for a closer look at Johnson's Silver Star lapel pin

For most of his life as a politician, Johnson proudly wore a Silver Star pin identifying him as a war hero. The small lapel pin can be seen in the famous photograph of Johnson taking the oath of office aboard Air Force One following John F. Kennedy's assassination in November 1963. For three decades, on occasions mundane and momentous, the small red, white and blue badge of courage was often visible on Johnson's suit coat.

"He wore the Silver Star in his lapel all his life, up to and through the presidency," said [Robert Caro](#), a historian and Johnson biographer. "When he was campaigning in Texas and he wanted to draw people's attention to it, he would actually do this (with his lapel) when he was giving a speech," said Caro, demonstrating how Johnson would grab his lapel with the Silver Star and flap it.

Whether Johnson truly rated the Army's third-highest combat award seen on his official portrait is a question his biographers have long debated.

"The most you can say about Lyndon Johnson and his Silver Star is that it is surely one of the most undeserved Silver Stars in history," Caro said. "Because if you accept everything that he said, he was still in action for no more than 13 minutes and only as an observer. Men who flew many missions, brave men, never got a Silver Star."

In an effort to clarify the historical record, CNN re-examined previously published documents about the wartime service of Johnson, who died in 1973, and conducted interviews with the few witnesses still alive.

While not conclusive, the available evidence raises questions not only about whether the Silver Star, now on display at the LBJ Library in Austin, Texas, was undeserved, but also whether it was awarded based on a battle report that may have been inaccurate and incomplete.



[LBJ LIBRARY]

Johnson was the first member of Congress to enter active duty in World War II

'Ambitious politician' enlists

After Japan's sneak attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Johnson, then a lanky lawmaker from Texas, became the first member of Congress to enter active duty.

"The minute WWII began, he was a very ambitious politician, and he understood if he was going to run for some higher office down the road, he needed to have some kind of military service," said [Robert Dallek](#), another Johnson biographer. "So he volunteered and became a naval officer. He's in Washington as a reserve naval officer, and he goes to see (President Franklin D.) Roosevelt and convinces him to send him on an inspection tour of the southwest Pacific."

Rare home movies, from a camera Johnson carried on that tour, show Roosevelt's young protege in Australia, where he met

MacArthur, who allowed him to go on a single bombing mission as an observer.

Johnson was awarded his Silver Star for that one combat mission on June 9, 1942, on a bombing run in which 11 American B-26s attacked a Japanese base in [Lae, New Guinea](#). It was his only combat experience in an eight-month military career.

The source for most accounts of what happened is a book titled "The Mission," published in 1964 after Johnson became president.

Based on the crew's firsthand account, authors Martin Caidin and Edward Hymoff painted a vivid picture of how the B-26 bomber -- hobbled by a failed generator -- limped back to base, fending off attacking Japanese fighters, using its crippled guns and evasive maneuvers.

In the book, Johnson is described as "cool as ice" and "laughing" in the face of a withering attack by Japanese Zeros.

"Bullets were singing through the plane all about us," waist gunner Lillis Walker told the authors, who are now dead. "We were being hit by those cannon shells, and he was -- well -- just calm and watching everything."

The passage was a gripping account of courage under fire -- except, according to the sole surviving crew member -- it was pure fiction.

"No way," said retired Army Staff Sgt. [Bob Marshall](#). "No, that story was made up, put in there in my mind by the author of the book. 'Cause we never seen Zero, was never attacked. Nothing."

"The Mission" authors portrayed Marshall, a 19-year-old gunner on Johnson's plane, as overcoming the loss of electrical power by using brute strength to aim his guns against the Japanese.

But Marshall insists it never happened.

"That was something I would never forget if I had to do that," Marshall said. "We never got attacked. I had no reason to swing my guns, my turret. Them was built-up stories."

Marshall said he remembers meeting the young Navy officer who flew along on his plane that day but didn't know who he was then and didn't learn until years later that Johnson received the Silver Star for the flight. For years, he said he quietly disputed the published account in private conversations and occasionally in public, but almost no one paid attention.

"If that so-called observer, LBJ that day, got it, the whole crew should have gotten it," Marshall said. "That's the third-highest award you can get."

Did plane come under fire?

Historian and aviation writer [Barrett Tillman](#) has long contended that Johnson's plane turned back well before it could have engaged the enemy.

"Johnson, I think, to his credit, was willing to put himself in harm's way for whatever reason," Tillman said, "but about 80 miles southwest of the target, his aircraft developed generator trouble and was forced to turn back."

Tillman and researcher Henry Sakaida first published this version of events in 1993 and updated their argument in an article in a recent issue of Naval History magazine.

"The citation, as written for the Silver Star, was completely erroneous," Tillman said.



Johnson is greeted in Port Moresby, New Guinea before his single mission as an observer on a B-26 bomber in 1942

The criteria for the Silver Star, established by law in 1932, state it is "for gallantry in action against an enemy of the United States while engaged in military operations involving conflict with an opposing foreign force" and specify that the "required gallantry ... must ... have been performed with marked distinction."

Johnson's Silver Star citation says, "As our planes neared the target area, they were intercepted by eight hostile fighters." While implying that Johnson's plane was among them, the citation doesn't actually say his B-26 came under fire.

The citation goes on to read, "The plane in which Lieutenant Commander Johnson was an observer developed mechanical trouble and was forced to turn back alone, presenting a favorable target to the enemy fighter; he evidenced marked coolness in spite of the hazard involved. His gallant action enabled him to obtain and return with valuable information."

Tillman said, "He may have well brought back valuable information to Washington, D.C., but it was not, definitely not, in context of direct combat."



Johnson was given the Silver Star by MacArthur, who also awarded a Distinguished Service Cross -- an even higher award -- posthumously to another member of Johnson's inspection team.

Lt. Col. Francis Stevens died in the one B-26 that was shot down that day. In a twist of fate, Johnson originally had boarded that B-26. After a bathroom break, Johnson got on a different plane nicknamed the "Heckling Hare."

According to flight records, on June 9, 1942, the bombers took off at 8:51 a.m. for the [two-hour, 20-minute round trip to Lae, New Guinea](#). The attack was set for about 10 a.m.

Tillman said that the timeline makes it impossible for Johnson's plane to have come under attack.

"The time distance equation leaves absolutely no doubt as to what happened, even without the testimony of the people who flew the mission," said Tillman, pointing at a chart of eastern New Guinea. "Based on the known cruising speed of a B-26 and the time that's involved, the mathematics shake out to a point just about 80 statute miles south of the target area. At which point, the Heckling Hare turned around, jettisoned its bombs in order to lighten load and returned to [Port Moresby](#)."

An ambiguous diary entry

During his public life, Johnson rarely kept a diary, but he did on his Pacific tour. His handwritten account of what happened that day is on display at the LBJ Library.

The June 9 diary entry could be interpreted as indicating Johnson's plane was attacked, just after it turned back. The scrawled pencil notes say, Generator went out: Crew begged ... to go on. For next 30 minutes we flew on one generator. Due to drop bombs at 10:10. At 9:55 we turned. At 9:58 Zeroes intercepted -- Andy leader got 3 and probably another. B-25 got two more and fighters got four. Total 9 zeroes.

Longtime Johnson aide and friend Harry Middleton puts a lot of stock in Johnson's contemporaneous diary account. Middleton is the director of the LBJ Library and Museum, where CNN was referred after members of Johnson's family declined several requests for interviews.

"Obviously it is close to the best source of information you can get," Middleton said. "A lot depends upon what was in the person's mind as he was writing about his activities, but sure it's primary material."

But the diary -- like the citation -- is ambiguous. What appears to be an account of what happened to Johnson's plane again might simply refer to what happened to the 10 planes that completed the bombing run.

That interpretation is what historian Tillman argues -- that the timing doesn't add up. There is no earthly way Johnson could have seen the Zeros attacking, he said.

There is at least one other eyewitness still alive, [Albert Tyree](#), a radio operator and gunner on another B-26 that day.

Now 80 and retired in California, Tyree insists Johnson's plane turned around long before the rest of the planes encountered enemy fire.

"So you saw it turn around and go back?" CNN asked him.

"Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah," Tyree said.

"Were you under fire at that point?"

"No, no. None of us was," insisted Tyree. "We weren't under fire until we got up close to Lae Air Base, the Japanese air base."

"How certain are you that the plane Johnson was on didn't come under fire?" CNN asked.

"I'm sure. He couldn't of 'cause we didn't get hit either 'till about right before we dropped our bombs."

"And you're absolutely sure of that?"

"I'm absolutely sure."

While Tyree would have no way of knowing what happened to Johnson's plane after it turned back, there is other evidence.

The Army's after-action report records the damage to all the planes that returned to Port Moresby after the June 9 bombing. Damage to the planes is listed down to the last bullet hole, but the list doesn't include Plane 1488 -- the B-26 on which Johnson flew. ([Read a page from the flight record](#))

But records can be incomplete or contain mistakes. For instance, a manifest prepared after the attack lists Johnson's rank as commander, instead of lieutenant commander, and it shows, above his, the name of a Sgt. Newhouse, a man that Bob Marshall replaced on the crew. At least that's how

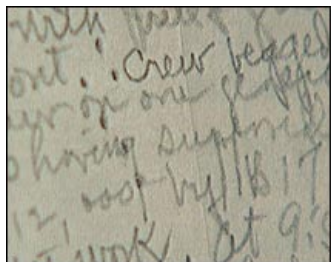


Johnson had his Silver Star pin on when he took the oath of office as president following John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963

Marshall remembers it.

In fact, Johnson's plane is recorded as landing at 10:08 a.m., with engine trouble two minutes before the other B-26s were scheduled to drop their bombs on Lae, according to Johnson's diary. ([Read the crew manifest](#))

"I'm telling the truth," he said. "I don't build up stories. I'm not selling a book or a story. I'm 100 percent right in my mind. And in a lot of other guys' minds."



Johnson's wartime diary entry concerning the mission is ambiguous

Johnson never disputed account of bravery

The LBJ Library in Austin contains more than 45 million pages of documents, filling five floors. But as complete as these documents are, they don't definitively answer the question of whether Johnson's combat service was a myth. That question is something that will remain a matter of debate among historians.

One of those records in the library is a letter on Johnson's congressional letterhead, dated July 15, 1942, addressed to the adjutant general of the War Department, suggesting

Johnson didn't deserve the Silver Star. It reads in part:

"I should not and could not accept a citation of recognition for the little part I played ... for a short time in learning and facing with them the problems they encounter all the time. The coolness for which the General commends me was only the reflection of my utter confidence in the men with whom I was flying."

"Watching the fighting crew of my ship save their crippled plane despite interception by hostile fighters outnumbering us, burned into my mind knowledge of concrete conditions which you can make sure I shall use to the best of my ability in the service of my country."

He concludes, "I cannot in good conscience accept the decoration."

But the letter is unsigned, and there is no evidence it was ever sent. ([Read the unsent letter 1 | 2](#))

The LBJ Library's Middleton said not much is known about the circumstances surrounding the letter.

"We know nothing about it other than it is there," Middleton said. "There's no explanation that I know of. It simply is there, amassed along with all the other papers."

Johnson biographer Caro said, "I've always felt the Silver Star should have been turned back, that he should have sent the letter, rejecting it because he didn't deserve it."

If Johnson had doubts about accepting the medal, he put them aside, and the legend of his wartime exploits began to grow.

While Johnson never endorsed the 1964 book "The Mission," he wrote the authors a brief thank-you note.

As soon as I have a few moments, Johnson wrote, I intend to begin reading it. ([Read the thank you letter](#))

But Johnson never disputed the account of his bravery, and he would on occasion make reference to his combat experience, as he did in a December 20, 1963, phone conversation with House Speaker John McCormick. The White House routinely recorded the president's phone conversations.

"I know foreign aid is unpopular," Johnson told McCormick. "But I didn't want to go to the Pacific in '41 after Pearl Harbor, but I did. And I didn't want to let those Japs shoot at me in a Zero, but I did."

Longtime Washington journalist Hugh Sidey, who covered the Johnson White House, recalls the president telling stories about his wartime exploits.

"He talked about the Jap ace and about how he had gone out as an observer and they attacked the plane and how the bullets came zinging inside the fuselage and the crew got wounded and there was blood all over," Sidey said.

Was Johnson living a lie? It depends on who renders the judgment.

"I don't think its totally out of the question that he might have embellished on the story and used it for political purposes while he was campaigning," Middleton said. "But I never heard him talk about it at all."



Johnson spoke of his combat experience in a 1963 phone conversation with House Speaker John McCormick (1:126 K/12 sec. [AIFF](#) or [WAV](#) sound)

For Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer Caro, the eyewitness accounts, published in "The Mission," outweigh the circumstantial evidence that suggests Johnson's plane may not have come under fire.

"I think that the weight of the evidence at this moment is that the plane was attacked by zeroes and that he was cool under fire," Caro said.

Caro argues that if the quotes in "The Mission" were untrue, someone would have spoken up before now.

"All the members of that crew except for the two who were killed in the war were alive then," Caro said. "None of them ever disputed any of the quotations in the book, and if you read the quotations in the book, they were a very convincing picture of men scared under fire."

Politics over bravery?

Researchers Tillman and Sakaida have a different theory: The two surviving crew members lied, possibly to curry favor with the new president.

"The members of the 22nd Bomb Group to whom Henry and I talked over a period of five or six years," Tillman said, "were almost unanimous in their assessment of the two individuals that Caidin and Hymoff most frequently quoted in their book called 'The Mission.' One of them was described as a fellow flier as a great one for putting himself in the limelight. The other one apparently became a Democrat Party activist in the Chicago area and was willing to go along with Lyndon Johnson's version of events."

Historian Dallek, who also has written several books on Johnson, said the evidence, while conflicting, buttresses his argument that the Silver Star was more about politics than bravery.

"What I concluded," Dallek said, "was that there was an agreement, a deal made between LBJ and Gen. MacArthur. And the deal was Johnson would get this medal, which somebody later said was the least deserved and most talked about medal in American military history. And MacArthur, in return, had a pledge from Johnson that he would lobby FDR to provide greater resources for the southwest Pacific theater."

History -- it has been said -- is argument without end. It is impossible to reconstruct with absolute certainty what happened nearly 60 years ago. Memories can be wrong, and records don't tell the whole story.

Still, even Caro said if Johnson did tell the truth, he didn't tell the whole truth.

"I would say that it's a issue of exaggerations," Caro said. "He said that he flew on many missions, not one mission. He said that the crew members, the other members of the Air Force group, were so admiring of him that they called him Raider Johnson. Neither of these things are true."

'A very complicated man'

Tillman argues the version of Johnson's Silver Star airplane ride in today's history books needs to be updated if future generations are to understand the late president.

"I think the best explanation I can give for trying to learn the truth is that so often what we accept as conventional wisdom is simply the first draft of history," Tillman said.

Dallek agrees that, even though the events happened long ago, it's still important to try to figure out the truth.

"It matters that the record is accurate because it speaks volumes about the man, about his character, about his place in history, about judgments that historians make on him," Dallek said. "Is he to be trusted?"



"The more egregious offense is perpetuating the myth," Tillman said. "Johnson, or anyone else caught in that situation, simply could have put the medal away in a drawer, not bothered to wear the lapel pin the rest of his life, but we know that Johnson did."

Family friend Middleton said Johnson was a complex man.

"He had many, many faults," Middleton said, "but they were counterbalanced by a great vision of what he should do and could do for this country, which is what united us all who worked for him. I've been around when I've heard him say things that I thought, Can that really be the case? But then I've heard him then say things that make me awfully proud to be associated with him. He's a difficult, a very complicated man."

For former radio operator and gunner Marshall, it's a point of honor to tell the truth, the best he knows it.

"My wife always tells me, she says, 'Bob, why don't you forget the past? That's gone.' I say, 'Betty, when you're in a position like we was in those days, it's going to be there forever, and I would like to have all this story made up straight.'"

"We're all going to leave this world some day, and it gets closer and closer. And I'd like the truth to actually be put out about it," Marshall said. "I don't want to be put on something I didn't do."

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